

ED 338 599

SP 033 406

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TITLE The Shape of Professional Communities in Schools.  
INSTITUTION Center for Research on the Context of Secondary School Teaching.  
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.  
REPORT NO P91-136  
PUB DATE Apr 91  
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, April 3-7, 1991).  
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - General (140)  
  
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; Collegiality; \*Educational Principles; \*Faculty Development; High Schools; Improvement Programs; Inservice Teacher Education; \*Policy Formation; Professional Recognition; Teacher Effectiveness  
IDENTIFIERS \*Professional Community; \*Professionalism; Professional Socialization

## ABSTRACT

The study described here examined the professional communities of teachers in American high schools. Data were derived from a series of observations and interviews undertaken over a 3-year period in six high schools in Michigan. Based on these data, the study developed a working definition of the term "professional community," described the professional communities observed in the schools studied, and formulated some general guidelines that can be used by policymakers and practitioners to nurture and promote the development of strong professional communities in schools. Recent research and policy analyses in education suggest that when teachers within a school form tightly knit professional communities there are positive benefits for students such as experiencing a higher quality of teaching, becoming more engaged in schooling, and having higher academic achievement. Within these communities teachers: (1) share a common core of educational values; (2) feel a strong sense of collegiality and have intensive collaborative relationships, both of which factors support continuing professional development and improved mastery of teaching; and (3) have a strong commitment to improving the work setting. (LL)

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**THE SHAPE OF PROFESSIONAL  
COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOLS**

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April 1991

This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association in Chicago, Illinois, April, 1991.

Research reported here was conducted under the auspices of the Center for Research on the Context of Secondary School Teaching with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, US Department of Education, Cooperative Agreement #OERI-G0087C235. The author acknowledges the assistance and comments of Barbara Reinken, Kathleen Sernak, James Spillane, Milbrey McLaughlin, and Joan Talbert.

# THE SHAPE OF PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOLS

Brian Rowan

Recent research and policy analyses in education suggest that when teachers within a school form into tightly knit professional communities there are positive benefits for students. In professional communities, teachers:

- o share a common core of educational values;
- o feel a strong sense of collegiality and have intensive collaborative relationships, both of which support continuing professional development and improved mastery of teaching; and
- o have a strong commitment to improving the work setting.

Research demonstrates that students whose teachers are involved in professional communities experience a higher quality of teaching (Little, 1982; Ashton and Webb, 1986; Rosenholz, 1989), are more engaged in schooling (Newmann, 1983; Bryk and Driscoll, 1989; Wehlage et al., 1990), and have higher achievement (Ashton and Webb, 1986; Bryk and Driscoll, 1989; Rosenholz, 1989).

This paper examines the professional communities of teachers in American high schools. Data for the paper are taken from a series of observations and interviews undertaken over a three-year period in six high schools in Michigan. Based on these data, the paper develops a working definition of the term "professional community," describes the professional communities observed in the schools in the study, and formulates some general guidelines that can be used by policymakers and practioners to nurture and promote the development of strong professional communities in schools.

## I. TOWARD A WORKING DEFINITION OF PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITIES

The initial problem for this paper is to develop a working definition of the term professional community. Based on previous research, the working definition used here has three dimensions.

First, following the classic sociological work of Goode (1957), a professional community is defined here as a group of individuals who share a common set of norms and values, especially norms and values that are relevant to what might be called "technical rationality." For example, in education, the norms and values of a professional community will describe the preferred educational goals of teachers as well as methods of teaching assumed to lead to the achievement of these goals (Rowan, 1990). In addition, these "norms of rationality" will be related to other technical beliefs held by teachers, for example, beliefs about the nature of knowledge and how it can be taught, about the nature of students and how they learn, and about the nature of teachers and how they work. Together, these norms and beliefs constitute what this paper calls a professional culture, and this culture is seen here as one of the defining elements of a professional community in education.

In addition, this paper assumes that professional cultures are "carried" by social groups (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). That is, like any culture, professional cultures are created and sustained within the context of a social group that gives legitimacy to and structures action based upon the central norms and beliefs of the culture. Following previous research, it can be assumed that professional cultures emerge in educational settings when individuals feel a strong sense of collegiality and engage in intensive collaboration with others (Little, 1982; Ashton and Webb, 1986; Rosenholz, 1989; Newmann, Rutter, and Smith, 1989). The felt solidarity and sustained interactions that

accompany collegiality and collaboration tend to build common norms and beliefs among group members, and these norms and beliefs come to guide the actions of group members. Thus, in this paper, collegiality and collaboration are viewed as essential elements of a strong and coherent professional community.

Finally, the working definition of professional communities used in this paper holds that members of a professional community not only share common norms and beliefs and work together closely, but also have a high commitment to the rational improvement of the group's work. This element of a professional community was first described in Little's (1982) seminal discussion of the norm of continuous improvement among teachers, a norm that commits teachers to the continuous improvement of teaching. In this paper, this norm is also seen as involving a commitment to change organizational structures, policies, and working conditions in schools if that is needed to improve organizational performance. Thus, in this paper, a third defining characteristic of professional communities is the high level of effort given by group members to the improvement of teachers' work and to the improvement of organizational outcomes.

In summary, this paper views professional communities in any organization as groups of individuals who share common technical norms and beliefs, feel a strong sense of collegiality and engage in intensive collaboration with the purpose of improving the technical performance of the organization in which they work. Following past research, we argue that when these professional communities exist in schools, students experience a higher quality of teaching, are more engaged in learning, and have higher achievement.

## II. THE ORGANIZATION OF PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOLS

Given this working definition, we turn to a second task--to describe how professional communities can be organized in schools, especially high schools. In this section, the problem is to define how professional communities come into being and how they are bounded by group formations.

The classic statement on these issues was made by the sociologist Goode (1957), who argued that professional communities are organized when occupations become strong corporate professions in the sense of having an association, a standard of conduct and ethics, and formalized institutions that provide professional training. When this is the case, the norms and beliefs of a professional culture, the strong sense of collegiality and the intensive collaboration among professionals, and the unwavering commitment of professionals to the improvement of technical performance are institutionalized in the activities of the professional association and its associated training institutions. In the literature on education, this view of professions as "corporate" or societal formations is perhaps best represented in Lortie's (1975) classic work, which tends to analyze the teaching profession as a whole under the assumption that this corporate group has some shared technical norms and beliefs, a sense of felt collegiality, and a commitment to the improvement of teaching. In this view, then, the professional community of schools is coterminous with the larger professional community of teachers, and it is this larger, "corporate" profession that is the source of professional culture and commitments in schools (e.g., Sykes, 1990).

Although this classic sociological model has been followed by some educational researchers, a second view of professional communities is found in the increasingly popular literature on the school as a workplace. In this literature, the prevailing ideal is

of the school, rather than the corporate profession, as the locus of professional community. Thus, this literature tends to treat professional communities as schoolwide phenomena. For example, in the workplace literature, schools are seen as most effective schools when all teachers within the school are highly committed to the school's distinctive educational mission, a shared mission which analysts believe emerges out of and is reinforced by high collegiality and collaboration among teachers (e.g., Little, 1982; Ashton and Webb, 1986; Rosenholz, 1989; Newmann, Rutter, and Smith, 1990, Wehlage et al., 1990). Thus, in the workplace literature, professional communities in education are seen as coterminous with school communities.

Although both these perspectives have many adherents among educational researchers and policy analysts, both tend to underrepresent the diversity of professional communities in American high schools. Consider, for example, the assumption of a uniform professional culture of teaching found in classic sociological treatments of professional communities. Research on the professions in both K-12 and higher education shows that the dominant trend in education is toward professional differentiation, not uniformity (see for example Kerr, 1983; Clark, 1987). Thus, there are now a host of professional specialties in teaching, especially in high schools, and each specialty has its own distinctive culture rooted in particular assumptions about the nature of knowledge, students, and teaching. In large part, these are differences grounded in disciplinary training and the specific technical requisites of teaching a particular subject matter (Stodolsky, 1988). Thus, disciplinary groups, rather than the profession as a whole, may form the basis of professional communities in schools (Clark, 1988).

A similar point can be made about the workplace literature and its emphasis on the school as source of a unified professional community. This focus on the school as a tightly organized community ignores a central fact about America's large, comprehensive high schools. The typical comprehensive high school in the United States is differentiated into various academic departments, and within these departments, there are also various academic tracks. The general literature on organization theory long ago pointed out that these forms of structural differentiation can give rise to cultural differentiation within organizations (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967). Moreover, recent quantitative research on school organization appears to confirm this point (Pallas, 1989; Rowan, Raudenbush, and Kang, 1991). As a result, there is every reason to expect that professional communities in schools can form among colleagues who share departmental affiliations or who work with the same groups of students by virtue of tracking arrangements in schools. Thus, in this view, professional communities are largely within-school formations.

Finally, both the assumption of a uniform professional culture of teaching and the assumption of a uniform professional community in schools ignore important differences among teachers in social background, differences that exist because entrance to the teaching profession in America is fairly open. Thus, differences among teachers in social background, rather than differences in professional association, disciplinary specialization, school membership, or location in the academic division of labor, might give rise to professional communities in schools. For example, feminist writings suggest the hypothesis that women will be more predisposed than men to see teaching as a supportive and nurturing endeavor and to form into collaborative associations with other teachers to support professional growth and organizational improvement (Noddings,

1984). Similarly, different ethnic groups may hold different views about the nature of knowledge, students, and teaching. As a result, professional cultures in schools may form around groups whose central affiliation is based on social similarity rather than common professional or organizational specialization. As a result, professional communities may be coterminous with informal group membership--for example, affiliations based on friendship, common social memberships, or other forms of social similarity.

Based on these considerations, this paper attempts to develop a view of professional communities in schools that is substantially different from both the classic sociological view of a professional community as institutionalized in the corporate profession and from the view of professional communities found in research on the school as a workplace, that is, as a schoolwide phenomena that entails the deep involvement of an entire school staff in a collaborative and mission-focused approach to school improvement. Because of the complexity of both the professions in education and the high schools in which educational professionals work, a much more diverse and pluralistic view of professional communities seems warranted.

### III. OBSERVATIONS OF PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITIES IN HIGH SCHOOLS

In our fieldwork in Michigan high schools, my colleagues and I have begun to search for professional communities wherever these arise. Moreover, once having found a particular professional community, we have attempted to chart the core values of the community, the bases of collegiality and collaboration among members, and the direction and persistence of the professional community's attempts to make rational improvements in the workplace.

The findings to date have uncovered a diversity of professional communities, both across the schools in our study and within any given school. These communities differ in terms of beliefs and values, in the intensity of collegiality and collaboration among teachers, and in the actions taken by the community to bring about school improvements. Some very brief sketches of various professional communities observed to date are presented in the following sections.

### Professional Associations

There was some evidence in our study supporting Goode's notion of a corporate professional community. For example, many teachers in our sample participated in professional communities that were based in teachers' unions or in discipline-based professional associations. Within these groups, teachers often worked closely with colleagues in a variety of collaborative efforts designed to improve teaching and working conditions in schools. However, within any given school, these associations did not appear to be influential, except when a member or members of the association exercised influence and leadership in some school-based group. For example:

- o Philip was a social studies teacher who was active in the teachers union, serving as a consultant to various union locals during collective bargaining talks. He applied the knowledge and beliefs carried by the union into his school when he convinced other members of his department to file a grievance against the school aimed at restoring the department chairmanship, which the district had removed as a cost-cutting measure. This grievance was successful and a chairman was put in place.
- o Sam was a science teacher, the chair of his department, and an active member of the statewide association of science teachers. He worked as a consultant in staff development and curriculum projects of the association and had been involved in many other professional projects over the years. As a faculty leader, his ideas about science instruction were influential, and his willingness to share information and ideas with other science teachers in the school improved the science teaching of his colleagues.

- o Bob was a social studies teacher who was very active in the statewide association of social studies teachers. Although he shared ideas about teaching gained from this association with other social studies teachers in his association, his ideas had little influence with fellow social studies teachers in the school. He also thought his professional activities interfered with his commitment to teaching. His energies were largely devoted to professional projects, which included curriculum development and trips to Israel and the Soviet Union, and he admitted that his external professional activities often left him with little time to prepare for his daily teaching duties.

These brief vignettes demonstrate the diversity of professional communities outside of schools (unions, disciplinary associations) and of the indirect and varying nature of their influence on school practices. Still, for many teachers, external associations were vital professional communities, serving as sources of norms and values, and providing collegiality and opportunities for collaborative work designed to improve education.

### Schools as Professional Communities

Diversity was also evident among school-based professional communities. However, in most cases, the schools we studied in Michigan did not appear to be active as schoolwide professional communities. There was one exception, however, a small, alternative high school that had much autonomy within the district:

- o Prospect school served students who, for a variety of reasons, left high school without a diploma. The professional culture of the school was best summed up by the director, who believed that "the failure of these kids in a regular school was that they just didn't have the contact with adults that cared about them." Based on this belief, the school had advising groups, and teachers were given free periods to meet with students and establish what the school's mission statement called "comfortable and personal student-teacher relationships." The job of teaching in this school was demanding, involving a variety of work in different teaching and counseling situations, but teachers in the school worked intensively to support each other in these tasks.

Prospect resembles the classic "mission-oriented" school described in the workplace literature, with unanimity of technical norms and beliefs, and much collegiality and collaboration that functioned to continuously improve the school. By comparison, the other high schools in the study showed less evidence of being tightly knit professional communities. Not surprisingly, these were larger, comprehensive high schools, four of which were in urban areas and one of which was a suburban high school. In these schools, the schoolwide professional community was less intensive. In these larger, comprehensive high schools, departmentalization, faculty size and diversity, and the size of the school building all worked against the establishment of a schoolwide professional community.

As a result, the organization and influence of schoolwide professional communities were hard to observe in the large, comprehensive high schools in the Michigan sample. Nevertheless, a schoolwide community was observable in two schools, and in these cases, it appeared that these communities were primarily oriented to issues of student discipline. Two schools illustrate this point:

- o Monroe High School is an inner-city school serving students of poverty. Faculty are concerned about discipline problems among students, which they see as rooted in the social background of students. A major source of informal collaboration and collegiality among teachers occurs in the exchange of information about disciplinary problems in the school, information that provides teachers with early warning of potential disciplinary problems and helps resolve or avoid these problems. Formally, this professional community has acted to improve student discipline under the auspices of the school's building improvement team. Disciplinary rules have been changed, teachers are cooperating in implementing these changes, and disciplinary practices within the school are becoming more consistent.

The case of Monroe High School illustrates the importance of the informal professional community--the network of teachers who, out of sense of collegiality, form into an informal social network to exchange information. This informal

community was united by concern for a single issue--student discipline--and by a particular set of assumptions about: (1) the root causes of disciplinary problems (students are responsible for their own behavior), (2) the best remedy for these problems (discipline), and (3) the best way for teachers to act in the face of these problems (band together and stay on top of the problem).

A second vignette--a rare case in which a school is divided into two professional cultures--also illustrates how conceptions of appropriate student behavior are important as sources of professional community in high schools.

- o Washington Academy was formed out of the merger between a mission-oriented magnet high school and a large, comprehensive high school, a merger brought on by changing patterns of enrollment within an urban school district. In this school, there was open conflict between the two school staffs, in part because the magnet school's mission of back-to-basics instruction and strict-discipline were imposed upon faculty from the comprehensive high school at the time of the merger. Although there was conflict between faculties around multiple issues, conflict was most evident in a schoolwide debate about the student dress code. The dress code, more than any other issue, came to be a key dividing line for the two professional communities in this school.

### Professional Communities Within Schools

While it was possible to discern schoolwide professional communities in the large, comprehensive high schools in the study, these communities tended to be weak in strength and focused on issues of student behavior. However, as we turned to an examination of within-school professional communities, we began to see stronger professional communities and communities that were focused on issues of teaching and learning. Here too, there was great diversity. Within schools, departments often functioned as vital professional communities. But schools also contained other subgroups of teachers, sometimes interdisciplinary teams, sometimes teachers drawn together by a common

concern for a group of students, and sometimes teachers drawn together by friendship and/or opportunity.

We begin by describing departments as professional communities and with a vignette of a tightly knit, department-based, professional community:

- o The science department at Dover High School functions as a tightly knit professional community as defined in previous research. The members of this department (with the exception of the biology teachers) all subscribe to inquiry methods of teaching. The emphasis is on developing hands-on, problemsolving learning situations that often require extensive preparation. Department members support each other extensively, sharing equipment, ideas, and empathy throughout the day.

It is important to note that there were several departments across the five comprehensive high schools that functioned like the science department at Dover High School, perhaps 20% of all the academic departments observed. The remaining departments, however, fell short of the ideal of shared values, high collegiality, and commitment to rational improvement in one way or another. For example:

- o The English department at Dover High School was marked by conflict among teachers over "process writing." One group of "born-again process writers" were following the assistant superintendent's recommendation to emphasize process writing in the curriculum, another group of teachers in the department was dead-set against this approach, and several other faculty were somewhere in the middle. There was lively debate among teachers over this issue, and the dissensus among faculty limited collegiality and collaboration. Actions intended to improve teaching were done on an individual basis or with a common-thinking colleague.
- o The science department at Monroe High School was a very loosely knit professional community. Teachers rarely talked about teaching, in large part because they did not share common prep periods. The department also was not a source of professional norms, beliefs, or actions. Instead it functioned as a supply depot and information exchange about school activities. There was a tendency for teachers teaching the same class to meet frequently, in one teacher's estimate, three times a week. But here, the focus was mainly on pacing, and teachers were not overly concerned that they were covering the same amount of material as others.

In addition to departments, interdisciplinary teams and other team teaching relationships served as the locus of active professional communities in schools. Two vignettes illustrate this point:

- o At LaSalle High School a new TECH PREP course of study has been founded by an interdisciplinary team of five teachers. The two-year program serves 30 students, who move from class-to-class as an intact group. The five teachers who formed this program met extensively during the summer months to design the program, have a common planning period during the school day, are frequently found in each others classrooms during the school day, and meet frequently after school hours. All of the teachers are concerned with developing integrated learning assignments, often based on a particular problem or theme. Moreover, the teachers report that they have been revitalized by their participation in the program. This team has served as the inspiration for the formation of a second TECH PREP team that has now begun to work with another group of students.
- o At Dover High School, two English teachers volunteered to write a new English curriculum for remedial students. They envisioned a situation in which all classes would be team taught by a subject-area teacher and a special education teacher. The two teachers convinced the school principal--who wanted to improve instruction for low-achieving students--of the wisdom of the approach; they also secured a grant from the school board to develop the curriculum during the summer. The program was piloted in ninth grade classes in the fall and proved so successful that other departments followed it, and now all remedial sections of academic classes are team taught.

In both of these examples, there are two common features. First, in both cases, positive changes were initiated by a teacher who exercised leadership among his or her peers. In addition, in both cases, these teacher-initiated designs for improvement received the support of school administration. Under these conditions, working arrangements at the school were modified so that teaching situations could be brought into line with teachers conceptions of knowledge, students, and teaching. As this occurred, the programs motivated the participating teachers and spread to other sectors of the school.

#### IV. NURTURING AND PROMOTING PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOLS

The vignettes discussed above illustrate the great diversity of professional communities in schools. We have seen how faculty, operating with shared beliefs and collaborating with one another, form into tightly knit professional communities that implement positive changes in schools. Of course, these positive cases obscure the failures of professional community--the cases of faculty working in isolation, guided by idiosyncratic and personalized norms and beliefs, and having limited engagement in actions to improve teaching and learning. The problem for this section is how to revitalize these failed professional communities.

The important lesson to be drawn from our study is that in large, comprehensive high schools there are multiple professional communities--including those based in teachers unions, professional associations, schools, departments, teacher teams, and collegial groups. A second lesson is that the aggregate of all of these professional communities tends, in large, comprehensive high schools, to resemble a pluralistic political system. That is, in any given school, a multiplicity of groups espoused diverse educational values and beliefs. In the large schools in our study, this diversity seldom led to conflict. Instead, there was a real lack of overlap or intersection among various communities. What emerged, then, was not a unified "corporate" profession, or even much of a unified schoolwide professional community, except perhaps around a single issue and for a temporary period of time. Instead, schools contained diverse and largely unconnected professional communities, each serving a small sector of the school and maintaining only weak ties to other professional communities.

What are the implications of these findings for those who wish to promote professional communities in schools? First, the findings suggest that all of these social

formations (associations, unions, schools, departments, teams, informal groups) can serve as a starting point for the development of a professional community. Moreover, it appears that any number of issues, beliefs and values can serve as the focal point of a professional community. The strategy we propose for building professional communities in schools is to capitalize on this diversity: to encourage the formation of multiple professional communities in a given school, and to allow for the possibility that these communities, in the aggregate will pursue multiple improvement agendas.

In pursuing this strategy, it is necessary to consider the inter-relatedness of the various professional communities in a given school. In the strategy we propose, it is tempting to assume that the diversity of professional communities will lead to conflict. But, in fact, we should expect conflict only under certain conditions, for example, when professional communities are interdependent and pursuing conflicting courses of action in the same "issues arena." Our data seem to indicate that this is rarely the case in large, comprehensive high schools. In these schools, there is little interdependence among professional communities. Thus, each school can have a number of different professional communities, each mobilizing high degrees of commitment around issues that are relatively unrelated to one another.

Our data do suggest that potential for conflict can be especially high within academic departments. Here, the lack of a strong "corporate" profession means that faculty are often divided in their technical beliefs about knowledge, learning, and teaching in a specific subject area. These same faculty are also interdependent, especially if they operate under the guidelines of a sequenced curriculum and teach overlapping pools of students. Given this pooled and sequential interdependence, teachers depend on each other for individual success, and microscopic issues of

subject-matter pedagogy can be especially salient to members of the same department, as the case of "process writing" demonstrates. In the absence of unifying professional standards, the differing beliefs of teachers about issues like "process writing" can mobilize conflicting professional communities within a department.

This brings us to a fourth observation. The high-functioning professional communities observed in this study mobilized because one or more individuals exercised initiative and leadership. However, leadership alone did not assure a high-functioning community. A salient issue--one that affected the fates of teachers--also was required to mobilize a professional community to concerted action. Our study uncovered instances of individuals attempting to exercise leadership in the absence of a salient issue, and we observed salient issues in professional communities that went unresolved due to a lack of leadership. But only when both leadership and salient issues were present did professional communities mobilize.

Finally, the kind of unified, concerted action discussed above required certain structural conditions. Professional communities were most likely to be mobilized and sustained when the size of the professional community was small, when the organizational environment was structured to facilitate group interaction, and when the unit that served as the home for the professional community was relatively autonomous. Thus, at the school level, only Prospect, a six-teacher alternative high school that had a high degree of autonomy within the district, had a tightly knit professional community that functioned on a schoolwide basis. This school also gave teachers free time within the school day to interact with each other and with students. In larger schools, departments and teams were more likely to develop into high-functioning professional

communities, because of smaller size. But these subunits only mobilized when they were granted a measure of autonomy within the school and only to the extent that teachers in the group were physically proximate and shared common planning periods.

In short, these observations yield the following guidelines to policymakers interested in building professional communities in schools:

1. Capitalize on the diversity of professional communities and professional cultures to improve schools. Attempt to mobilize all communities in the school, and encourage each group to follow its own agenda.
2. Don't worry too much about conflict, especially if the aim is to improve large and highly differentiated schools. There are good chances that diverse groups in a school can pursue multiple (worthy) improvement agendas that are not in conflict.
3. Recognize the importance of both leadership and salient issues, since the development of an active and committed professional community requires both. Learn to locate issues that members of a community care about, and find a group leader who will help mobilize the community around this issue.
4. Remember that professional communities require time and opportunities for members to interact with one another and that they require a measure of autonomy to carry out concerted action.

## VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the viewpoint on professional communities presented in this paper differs from common conceptions. Attempts at building professional communities today often center around one of two strategies--mobilizing the "corporate" profession as a whole, or creating a schoolwide professional community through systematic school improvement activities. We have no quarrel with these approaches, except to the extent that they ignore other bases of professional community. Thus, to these two unidimensional strategies, we add a third strategy designed to capitalize on the diversity of professional communities in schools. In this view, departments, teams, and colleague

groups can be added to the list of potentially strong professional communities that can be mobilized in support of school improvement. Moreover, unlike these unidimensional strategies, we do not look for uniformity. Where multiple communities exist, all should be nurtured. The issues, ideas, and beliefs that are important in education are many in number, and a pluralistic system of professional communities seems especially likely to capitalize on the diversity of worthy ideas that can bring about improved teaching and learning in schools.

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